

finding the
space
to lead

It's easy to get caught up in a swirl of thoughts and worries. But what we really need as leaders is continual attention to detail and to the needs of others while still appreciating the big picture. **Janice Marturano**, former vice president at General Mills, shows us how it's possible to find the space to lead.

Illustrations by Andrew Bannecker



Leading people is one of the most challenging roles we can take on in life. It requires a dizzying array of skills, a strong education, and passion. Most often, when we take on a leadership role, we do so because we want to make a difference. As leaders, we take for granted that we will work long hours, make great sacrifices, and ride the roller coaster of success and failure. However, the busyness that accompanies being a leader in today's 24/7/365 interconnected world often distracts us from what's important and limits our ability to lead with excellence. When we are really honest with ourselves, we may have to admit that there are far too many times when we feel as though we're spending the day putting out fires and wasting time rather than doing our best work.

Does it need to be this way? Happily, the answer is no.

You can learn to lead with excellence by cultivating your innate capabilities to focus on what is important, to see more clearly what is presenting itself, to foster greater creativity, and to embody compassion. When you are able to do so, you are much more likely to make the conscious choices we need our leaders to make. These choices often lead to a win-win-win scenario: good for the organization, good for the employees, and good for the community.

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Janice Marturano is the founder of the Institute for Mindful Leadership and a certified mindfulness teacher.

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Why Do We Need Mindful Leadership?

To answer that question, let's begin with a look at what it means to be mindful.

When you are mindful of this moment, you are present for your life and your experience just as it is...

not as you hoped it would be
not as you expected it to be
not seeing more or less than what is here
not with judgments that can lead you to a conditioned reaction
...but for exactly what is here, as it unfolds, meeting each moment with equanimity.

As we consider the challenges leaders face today, it's relatively easy to see how much we need to cultivate mindful leadership. The environment we live and work in is constantly evolving. Time is now often measured in internet microseconds. There are new and complex economic and resource constraints on our organizations. We are attached 24/7 to an array of technological devices that regularly generate anxiety-producing information overload and a sense of disconnection that can overwhelm and isolate us. The world is changing so rapidly that people training for a career today may find their career path radically altered by the time they are ready to enter it. One paradigm after another is shifting. The volume of information at our disposal is, in fact, leading to less rather than more certainty. The number of voices and opinions we can hear on any given issue is so dauntingly large that we often don't know who or what to believe or follow.

It is also true, though, that these tumultuous times can offer great opportunity and ample possibilities for innovation, as the world becomes smaller and we begin to see the potential to meet the complexities of the day in ways that are truly creative, productive, and compassionate. It's a time to take leadership, and to redefine what it means to lead with excellence.

In my own experiences, first as a Wall Street associate, a community volunteer, an employee in three large organizations, and an officer of a Fortune 200 company for fifteen years, and then in the work I have done in offering mindful leadership training to leaders from around the world, I've consistently found that the best leaders' qualities go far beyond "getting the job done." The best leaders are women and men who have first-class training, bright minds, warm hearts, a passionate embrace of their mission, a strong connection to their colleagues and communities, and the courage to be open to what is here. They're driven to excellence, innovation, and making a difference. →

Reflecting on Excellence

Taking note of the qualities exhibited by leaders we admire can help all of us pinpoint how to become better leaders ourselves.

PRACTICE

Begin by sitting comfortably and closing your eyes. Notice the sensations of your breath. Allow your mind to let go of distractions.

When you're ready, bring to mind a person you believe embodies leadership excellence. This could be someone you know personally or a leader you have read about. Allowing yourself some time to let the answers arise, ask yourself the following questions:

Why did this person come to mind?

What is it about this person's leadership that made you think of him or her when asked about leadership excellence?

Be patient; hold the question in your mind with a sense of openness and curiosity. You don't need to overthink the question. Set aside the first answer or two to see if more qualities emerge. As you open your eyes, you may find it helpful to write your answers on a piece of paper before reading further.

When you listened for your responses to the reflection questions, you might have noticed that they did not include too many of the typical measures of organizational leadership. For example, you probably did not put *consistently makes his quarterly numbers* as the reason you admire the person as someone who leads with excellence. Rather, your list might have included some of the qualities named by other leaders who have explored this reflection with me:

Respectful
Open thinker
Compassionate
Clear vision
Able to inspire
Great listener
Creative
Patient
Collaborative
Kind
Teacher

It's not that hitting the quarterly numbers isn't important; it is. What sets people apart as leaders, however, is something much bigger than quantitative metrics. The people we call to mind in this reflection have touched us, inspired us, and made us feel their leadership. The qualities can be rolled up into just two capacities of leadership excellence, and these two capacities are embodied by those we identify as leading with excellence.

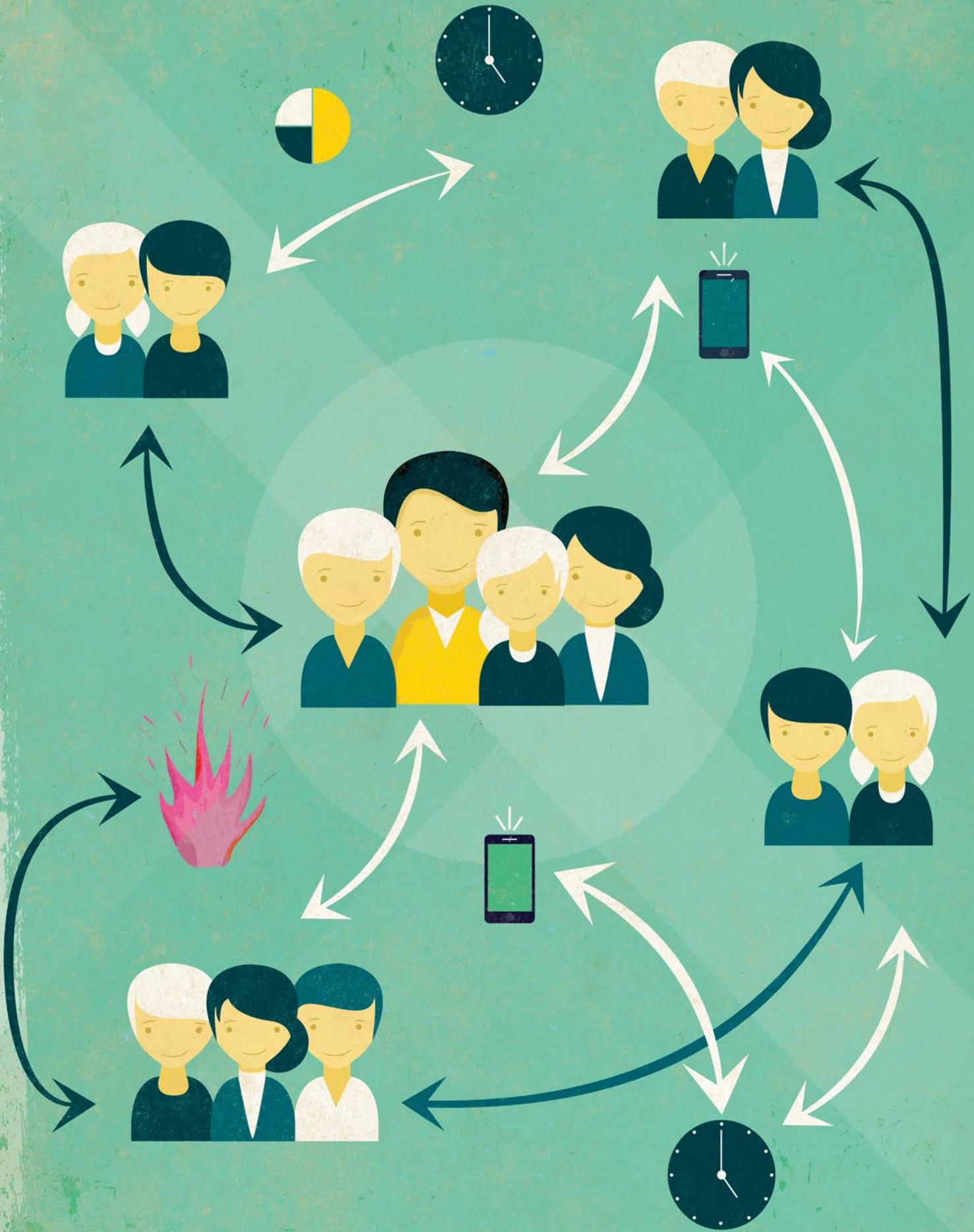
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Ability of a leader to connect—to self, to others, and to the larger community. Connecting to *self* is how we stay connected to our values and our ethics. It's the rudder we steer with in the midst of the chaos. How deeply we are able to connect authentically with *others* is the difference between an organizational environment that values inclusion and one that is insular and divided into silos that rarely communicate with each other. Connecting to the *community* comes from being able to see the bigger picture and not get caught up in the minutiae of a single objective. That wider connection is how great organizations give meaning to their existence and inspire their employees.

2

Ability of a leader to skillfully initiate or guide change. The important word is *skillfully*—leading not by command and control but by collaborating and listening with open curiosity and a willingness, at times, to live within ambiguity until a decision becomes clear. It's also this capacity that fuels a leader's willingness to take a courageous stand, lead the organization or industry into new arenas, and accept failures as experiments from which to learn.

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Yet time and again, they feel as though their capabilities and their leadership training are inadequate. They tell me that even as they execute well and meet the quarterly goals, they simply do not feel they are living their best lives—at work or at home. They feel something is missing. But what?

The most frequent answer is:

Space

We often simply do not have the space, the breathing room, necessary to be clear and focused, and to listen deeply to ourselves and to others. How can we expect to generate the connections with our colleagues and communities that we need when we are so busy that all we can really do is check off boxes, squeeze in a perfunctory hello to our coworkers, and get through the day's meetings and calls? Can we realistically expect leadership excellence when we spend whole days on autopilot—looking at our watches and wondering where the day went, looking at the calendar and wondering how it could be spring when just yesterday it was Thanksgiving?

Whether our leadership affects millions, hundreds, or a handful, we can no longer afford to be on autopilot in our lives, with our families, or in our organizations. We can no longer afford to miss the connections with those we work with, those we love, and those we serve. We can no longer make decisions with distracted minds, reacting instead of responding or initiating. We can no longer lose touch with what motivated us to lead in the first place. We need mindful leadership to lead with excellence.

So far we have been exploring the need to be present for leadership roles in the workplace. There is an equally, or perhaps more, important need to be present for your leadership roles in your personal life. Excellence involves making conscious choices about not just how you work but how you live your life and how you connect with your family, friends, and community. We need mindful leadership to live with excellence.

Leadership presence is not only critical for us as individuals but also has a ripple effect on those around us: the community we live in, and potentially the world.

What Exactly Is a Mindful Leader?

A mindful leader embodies leadership presence by cultivating focus, clarity, creativity, and compassion in the service of others.

Leadership presence is a tangible quality. It requires full and complete nonjudgmental attention in the present moment. Those around a mindful leader see and feel that presence.

A friend of mine decided to attend a local rally to see if he could get an important healthcare question answered by presidential candidate Bill Clinton. Of course, when he arrived, he faced a teeming, screaming crowd, but he maneuvered his way to the police barricade and waited. Clinton soon arrived and began walking along the barricade shaking hands. As my friend stretched out his hand and Clinton took it, he yelled out his question. In that moment, the candidate stopped, faced him, and responded to the question. Later my friend told me, “In those few moments when we spoke together, it seemed as though Clinton had nothing else on his mind. It was as if there was no other person there.” He felt heard and respected. That’s leadership presence: you give your full attention to what you’re doing, and others know it.

Leadership presence is powerful. In your own life, you can probably recall times when you experienced leadership presence, either in yourself or someone else. It might have been in a one-on-one conversation, or it might have been in an audience filled with people. Presence can be felt even from far away.

You can undoubtedly recall the much more common experiences when you feel only partially in the room, or you feel the person you’re speaking with is not really there. Like all of us, even when you have every intention to be focused, your mind becomes easily distracted—thinking about the past or the future, and only partially in the present if at all. In those moments, you are not embodying the innate capacity everyone possesses to be present.

Why is that? What do we know about *being present*?

As a beginning, you might recall a moment when you experienced full awareness in a situation. When there seemed to be nothing else but whatever you were noticing. This might have been a momentous moment like the birth of your child. In that moment, time seemed to stand still, and nothing else existed but the warmth of that miraculous being softly sleeping in your arms. You were not distracted by the to-do list or the noises in the hall. Your full attention—mind, body, and heart—was completely absorbed in that moment.

Or it might have been an ordinary moment, the kind often overlooked and not particularly celebrated. You may have lingered to notice a sunset. →

Meditate Right Where You Are

Most of us spend a great deal of time sitting behind our desks, or in conference rooms or colleagues' offices, so having a short practice that helps you relax while at work can be beneficial. What I call the desk chair meditation gives you a way to incorporate a short mindfulness practice into your day.

You may need to be creative to find the quiet place. Many people have told me that they're best able to do this practice by first leaving their office and finding an empty conference room, or even leaving the building to sit in their car during part of their lunch break. The desk chair part need not be taken literally. This meditation can be done anywhere you are able to sit quietly and practice, even an airplane seat.

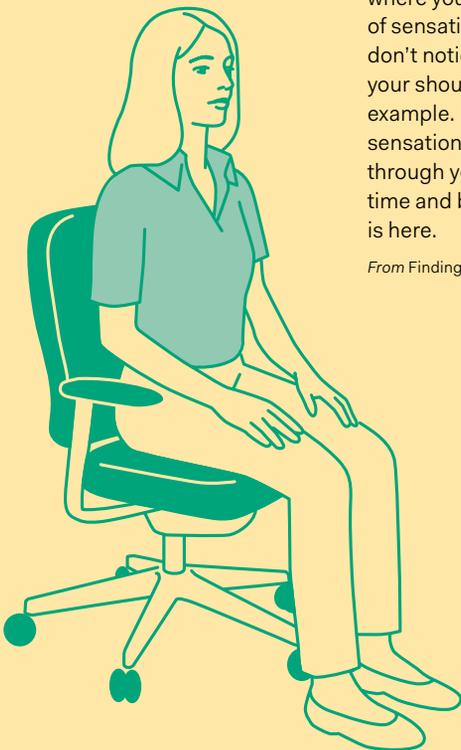
The main part of this practice involves what's called a "body scan," which is very simple to do.

Begin by bringing your attention to the sensations of your breath. When you're ready, direct your attention to the soles of your feet, opening your mind to whatever sensations are there to be noticed.

Perhaps you are noticing the pressure on the soles of your feet as the weight of your legs rests on them. Perhaps the soles of your feet feel warm or cool. Just notice. No need to judge or engage in discursive thinking. If your mind is pulled away or wanders, redirect your attention, firmly and gently.

Move your attention next to the tops of your feet, ankles, lower legs, knees, and so forth. Gradually scan through your body, noticing sensations, noticing discomfort, and noticing areas of your body where you detect an absence of sensations. You simply don't notice any sensations in your shoulders right now, for example. No need to search for sensations; just keep scanning through your body, taking your time and being open to what is here.

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Perhaps you recall that it stopped you dead in your tracks and held you in its beauty, all of you, for what seemed like forever but in clock time might have been just a couple of seconds. In those seconds, you became aware of the shades of pink and orange, the intricate play of light and shadow, your body's absorption of the waning energy of nature, and the feeling of belonging to something bigger than yourself.

Maybe you were at the coffee shop in the morning, your mind racing through the details of the upcoming day, and you looked up from your coffee and actually noticed a piece of art on the wall or the warm, comforting aroma of the shop. Whatever it was, it interrupted the busy mind, and you were living that moment of your life more fully.

Such moments—when we fully inhabit our bodies and our senses are at work on more than an internal storyline, checklist, or rehearsed conversation—are what give life true meaning. Beyond that, for those of us who hold positions of influence, the ability to be present, to embody leadership presence, is not only critical for us as individuals, but it also has a ripple effect on those around us: our families and friends, the organization we work within, the community we live in, and potentially the world at large. Just as a pebble thrown into a still pond can create ripples spreading throughout the whole of the pond, so too can the cultivation of leadership presence go far beyond the effect it has on us alone.

When the Institute for Mindful Leadership

works with an organization to bring mindful leadership training to its employees, we witness an example of the ripple effect. We often start with retreats or courses for the more senior leaders, and as the training begins to change how they lead, those around them notice the change and soon ask to enroll in the training as well. It's not unusual to hear people tell stories of the transformation they noticed in their manager. As leaders we know that we often underestimate the impact, for better or worse, that we have on those around us. When we are present and engaged, the effect is very different from when we are distracted and on autopilot. But it isn't enough to want to be more present, to want to

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have a positive ripple effect. We need to train the mind.

The work of developing leadership presence through mindfulness begins by recognizing how much time we spend in a mental state that has come to be called continuous partial attention. If you're like most of us, you probably take pride in your ability to multitask, to be incredibly efficient by simultaneously listening to a conference call, writing a few emails, and eating your salad at your desk.

Sound familiar to you? And yet, when you were listening in on the call, did you actually hear anything? Did you share your best thinking in the emails? Did you enjoy your lunch, or even notice you ate it?

Perhaps one of my most memorable lessons about the cost of multitasking came early one morning as I sat at my desk, getting things ready for a day filled with meetings and reviewing the latest emails. One of the messages that morning came from my husband, who was forwarding a message from my daughter's teacher. It was asking us to choose one of the available parent-teacher conference slots on her calendar, and my husband wanted to know which one I wanted before he replied. I wrote to my husband, "Thursday at 10 would be great. Love you forever, thanks for last night." Fine. Except that in my haste and partial attention, I wrote those words to my daughter's teacher. Needless to say, when I finally realized what happened, it became a moment to remember.

A few moments of people-watching in the hallways at work or on the sidewalk in front of your building can also give you a taste of the disconnection that results from multitasking. You'll notice people texting and checking email as they walk, barely avoiding walking into walls and each other. It has even become acceptable to do this while walking—and supposedly having a conversation—with someone else. Once upon a time, this would have been considered rude. Putting manners aside,

though, continuous partial attention can also be exhausting and inefficient. Neuroscience is now showing us that the mind's capacity for multitasking is extremely limited. We're really built for doing one thing at a time.

The hallways of offices used to be places for informal greetings and impromptu conversations. Valuable connections could be made in the hallways. Physiologically, a walk down the hallway used to allow a few moments of space when you could leave behind the thoughts of the last meeting and arrive at the next with a bit of openness. Today, few if any connections are made, as everyone rushes down the hall with thumbs blazing on smartphones. As a result, everyone arrives at the next meeting still attached to the last one.

We lead hurried, fractured, complex lives, and we seem to be more easily losing the richness and engagement that come from being in the present moment. With all the many ways we are enticed to get distracted, to drown out our intuition, and to fragment our attention, we can easily go through our entire lives without ever bringing all of our capabilities and attention to any given moment.

What do we do about that? Is leadership presence a natural gift possessed by a special few, or can it be cultivated? Can we train our minds to support our intention to live life with focus, clarity, creativity, and compassion even when our lives are hurried, fractured, and complex?

Thankfully, we can.

Leading with excellence, being fully present for what we do, and connecting with others—these are innate abilities we all possess. In my experience, those who are good leaders, and those who aspire to be good leaders, are eager to cultivate these abilities.

Mindful leadership training can do just that. By following simple practices that hone your attention and your ability to be aware of what's going on in your body and mind at any given moment, you can utilize all of your capabilities—clear minds and warm hearts and wise choices—and begin to see the results of leading from an authentic place. ●



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